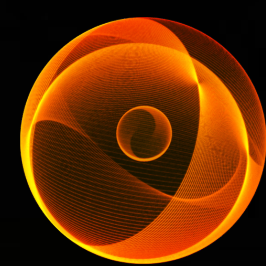


Senior Recital | Ashley Chua Kai Qian

MELANCHOLIA



YST

Yong Siew Toh
Conservatory
of Music

J.S. Bach

Italian Concerto

Olivier Messiaen

Préludes pour Piano: I, IV, VII, VIII

César Franck

Prelude, Choral et Fugue



30. 04. 2024 | Tuesday | 4.15pm

YST Concert Hall

Performer's Biography

Ashley Chua Kai Qian is a fourth year undergraduate at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (YSTCM), currently pursuing a Bachelor of Music (B.Mus) with a double major in Piano Performance and Music & Society (MS). Her mentors include Mr Lim Yan, Dr Thomas Hecht and Professor Ning An. She has also benefitted from masterclasses with renowned pianists, including Sir Stephen Hough, Kun-Woo Paik, and Professor Alexander Schimpf.

As a pianist, Ashley has participated actively in a range of concerts and competitions, placing 3rd in the Piano division of the YSTCM Concerto Competition 2022 with Poulenc's Aubade, and attaining a Special Mention in 2023 with Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5. In July of 2023, she was afforded the opportunity to attend the AmalfiCoast Piano Festival where she was coached by Professors James Giles, Enrico Elise, Yoshikazu Nagai, and Marina Lomozov. Most recently, she was selected as a winner of the 14th TSIPF Concerto competition, and will present Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 5 with the Central Texas Philharmonic.

Her background in music analysis and research as an MS major gave rise to her most recent paper *Gesture as Connection*, a year-long investigation into the effects of Soundpainting on communication between composers and performers. Outside of solo piano and music research, Ashley has a keen interest in collaborative piano and accompaniment, as well as in music and non-music related academia.

Italian concerto (1735)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 –1750)

During his time in Weimar, Bach's roles as court organist and concertmaster required the study and transcription of existing concertos, mainly by the likes of Vivaldi and his contemporaries. The popularity of 'Italian-style' music and the lasting influence of these transcriptions on Bach cannot be overstated – for only years later during his time in Leipzig, Bach would tap upon this influence to compose *Concerto nach Italiäenischen Gusto* (Concerto in the Italian taste) or rather, the Italian Concerto as it came to be.

A bold fanfare-like motif, conjuring imagery of brass festivities, heralds the beginning of the lively and boisterous movement – to begin with an energetic first movement was typical of music at the time, but in particular its lightness and virtuosity were a noticeable nod to 'Italian-styled' features. The piece's original nature for harpsichord inspires multiple instances of conversational dialogue between the hands that permeates the music – for the baroque instrument, these parts might be split between the upper and lower keyboards of a two-manual harpsichord, but the use of the modern piano in this performance instead requires this feature to be conveyed through the careful balance between the hands.

To the uninitiated, the middle andante movement might sound like the embodiment of expressive freedom – written to resemble an improvisatory aria, the lamenting melody soars overhead and morphs through ornaments in succession, all whilst navigating and subverting the sighing ostinato bass line. In truth, every detail had been written by Bach himself; in his bid to construct a scene of unrestrained anguish, the meticulously notated flourishes and ostinato leaves the performer to create an affect of melancholy and longing only through shades of tone colour and timing. Perhaps the narrative of this movement can be tracked by paying attention to the ostinato part; nearing the climax, the bass pedal descends to a low A, all while the sighing figures and the aria enter a spiel and spiral of sequential despair, before reaching a resigned acceptance.

The piece closes with a quick final movement, featuring the popular ritornello style of the time. The opening motif, initially entering with a celebratory and joyous character, reoccurs amidst exploratory developmental episodes carrying the music through a series of modulations – and correspondingly, through a journey of affects. Here, the textural advantages of a two-manual harpsichord are more present than ever; passages of interweaving polyphony and intertwined runs stands as a test not only to the dexterity of the fingers, but also to the deftness of the mind in heeding the demands of each individual voice.

Préludes pour piano (1929)

Olivier Messiaen (1908 – 1992)

I – La Colombe (“The Dove”)

IV – Instants défunts (“Dead Instants”)

VII – Plainte calme (“Calm Complaint”)

VIII – Un reflet dans le vent (“A reflection in the wind”)

Olivier Messiaen had made himself particularly well known for his unique harmonic language as well as an unequivocal mastery over complex rhythms, embedded within never-stagnant metres. Despite the meticulous calculations involved in his creations, his music was hardly mechanical or stoic – a strong interest in ornithology and nature is often reflected in the programmatic nature of his music, famously including the works of *Catalogue d'oiseaux* ("Catalogue of birds") and *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* ("Twenty Contemplations on the Infant Jesus"). *Préludes pour piano*, written considerably early in the composer's career, feature most prominently Messiaen's skilful navigation of set theory and his unique modes of limited transposition, in service of the visions illustrated in each prelude's namesake.

The composer's adoration for nature – he was, after all, an ornithologist – is evident in *La Colombe* (“The Dove”). A tritone bird call opens the prelude, followed immediately by oscillating chords in the right hand, depicting a dove's fluttering wings. Between these brief sections of flight exists a calmer lyricism, providing a brief respite before the dove takes a final ascent to the skies.

A champion of shifting metres and convoluted rhythms, Messiaen's temporal manipulation in *Instants défunts* (“Dead Instants”) brings forth an atmosphere of mystery and intangibility. Unease and instability assault the scoreless listener, owing both to rapidly changing time signatures – almost every bar – and instructions such as *Lent, ému, d'une sonorité douce et lointaine* (slow, moved, with a soft and distant sound), which conjure the timelessness that underpins this prelude.

Plainte calme (“Calm Complaint”) evokes a wistfulness and melancholia. The unresolving chromatic phrases, bolstered by the inner voice which Messiaen notates *marquez le chant et la voix intérieure* (mark the singing and inner voice), form the basis of the lament in the outer section of the movement. A quasi-tonal middle section alludes, perhaps, to a brief optimism, before the music reaches an outburst laced with resignation – one that is for naught, as the opening wistfulness returns to close the prelude, albeit riddled with nostalgia and regret.

Un reflet dans le vent (“A reflection in the wind”), the virtuosic finale to the set, builds upon unceasing runs simulating turbulent gales, which accompanies a fleeting melody in the right hand. The winds increase in intensity as the movement approaches its climax, all the while punctuated by rhythmic accents that recall similar accents in the opening, before culminating in a cascading torrent of chords running into an abrupt silence.

Prelude, Choral et Fugue (1884)

César Franck (1822 – 1890)

Prelude, Chorale et Fugue was conceived in 1884, during the final years of César Franck's life. At the time he had already achieved considerable success as a composer, as well as having spent a significant portion of his life employed at the organ at Sainte-Clotilde – his compositions from this period often reflect a masterful control of harmony and intricate texture. It is no surprise that, despite being a work for piano, the Prelude, Chorale et Fugue is frequently likened to Franck's extensive organ repertoire.

That the prelude reminisces Bach's keyboard preludes in texture and harmony is unsurprising, given the latter's profound influence upon Franck. Notably however, between the Bachian sections lay pseudo-recitative melodies that develop polyphonically, supported by dense anguished harmonies and chromatically meandering bass lines. It is within these sections that Franck marks a departure from Bach, incorporating distinctly romantic compositional techniques and tensions. While similar to the opening, the final occurrence of the Bachian prelude texture acts as the climax of this section – here, Franck introduces bell-like octaves in the lowest register which thickens the texture and underpins the climatic nature of the music. We may perhaps postulate that Franck's training as an organist influenced his writing here.

The chorale bridging the prelude and fugue betrays Franck's affinity for religion and his time in church. Now in Eb major/C minor, it stands as a reminder of Franck's penchant for unorthodox key relations, considering the prelude and later fugue both being in B minor. Even within the chorale, the thematic material is presented in two further keys, F minor and eventually Eb Minor, both in a distinctively different light from its initial statement. While initially evoking contemplative religiosity, its modulation to F minor introduces a tinge of desperation, before becoming engulfed in despondency in its Eb minor form. A short bridging section follows, which mediates the chorale and fugue sections.

Forming the subject of the fugue is a chromatically descending line marked by a sighing two-note slur motif which, in much of Bach's work, acted as religious symbolism. Franck's polyphonic manipulation of the music, coupled with the aforementioned chromaticism presents hitherto unheard harmonic dissonances and tensions which characterise the movement. The entrance of triplet ostinatos inaugurates a menacing middle section. Here, successive entrances of the fugue's subject over morphing harmonic movements culminate in a series of diminished arpeggios, leading to a mid-section climax. After a transitory arpeggiatic section, the final section featuring key material from the prelude, chorale and fugue begin. The texture of the prelude is primarily maintained, with the now bell-like chorale theme sounding above. The fugue's subject enters last, occupying the middle voice, coming to a head in a cacophony of church bells in B major.